A LIBRARIAN'S GUIDE TO MARVEL COMICS

Michael R. Lavin

Marvel Comics, along with rival DC Comics, is one of the two powerhouses of the comic book industry and has been for many decades. The company was founded in 1939 by pulp magazine publisher Martin Goodman. Goodman owned various publishing houses responsible for a variety of pulp titles, including *Marvel Science Stories*. In 1939, a colleague persuaded Goodman that comic books were the upcoming trend in periodical publishing, so Goodman launched a book called *Marvel Comics*. Issue no. 1 contained a story by Bill Everett about the Sub-Mariner, as well as the first appearance of the Human Torch. Both characters quickly became leading draws of the Golden Age of comics. Soon after, Goodman hired writer Joe Simon and artist Jack Kirby, who were to become giants in the industry. Simon and Kirby created Captain America, a character who remains a comics icon even today. In those early days, Goodman also hired another future legend: writer Stan Lee, who happened to be Goodman's nephew.

Goodman's comic company was known officially as Timely Comics, Inc., then later as Atlas Publishing. The firm did not change its name to Marvel until the early 1960s. Timely benefitted from the comics boom of the early 1940s, but interest in super-hero stories waned later in the decade. Atlas briefly revived its super-hero line-up in 1954, but the company spent most

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of the next decade publishing romance, western, horror, and humor comics.[1]

The Marvel Age of Comics

Following DC's success in reviving the popularity of super-heroes in the late fifties, Goodman directed Stan Lee to create a new stable of characters for Marvel. The ensuing collaboration of Kirby and Lee, with the assistance of artist Steve Ditko and others, resulted in one of the most prolific periods of creativity in comics history. Within a brief period from 1961 to 1963, Lee and Kirby created the Fantastic Four, the X-Men, Thor, the Hulk, Iron Man, and a score of other memorable heroes, together with an equally outstanding gallery of villains.

One of the secrets to this creative outpouring was a necessary innovation of Lee's. In the past, writers had submitted detailed scripts, which artists would follow page by page to create original art. Under Lee's variation, soon called the Marvel Method, the writer (Lee) would give a general plot outline to the artist, who was then free to lay out the story as he saw fit. Lee or another scripter would then add the accompanying dialogue and captions based on the finished art. The Marvel method not only enabled Lee to churn out more stories, but it harnessed the full creativity of the artists, acknowledging that they were indeed visual storytellers. In fact, it was not unusual for artist and writer to work out broad plot ideas together, during an animated brainstorming session.[2]

Lee's other great innovation led to what the company and its loyal fans would soon call the Marvel Age of Comics. Super-hero comics of the fifties and early sixties tended to be very formulaic, with noble, unswerving heroes, simplistic conflicts, and often times, gimmicky plot devices and trick endings. Little was seen of the hero's alter ego, except for the obligatory scene where he tried to hide his secret identity from friends and coworkers. Stan Lee changed all that by creating heroes with real problems, whose alter egos were every bit as important to the story as the hero's super powers. In other words, he introduced character development to the super-hero comic.[3] With protagonists like Spider-Man and the X-Men, he also changed the ubiquitous teenage sidekick into a hero in his or her own right. No better example can be found than Spider-Man, the reluctant teenage hero who, as Peter Parker, struggled daily with his crushing guilt, high school bullies, meager finances, a sickly aunt, and, like nearly all Marvel heroes, a topsy-turvy love life.

A third innovation, based on the work of Jack Kirby, John Romita, and other staff artists who followed, was the development of a house style. Marvel demanded that its art work always be larger than life. The men looked taller, handsomer, and more heroic. Women became the epitome of female beauty for their day. And nothing was ever humdrum. Even when a character was standing still or talking on the telephone, the layout had to convey a sense of drama, excitement, or anticipation.[4] These innovations, coupled with some of the best writers and artists in the business, allowed Marvel to outdistance DC for years to come.

As if all these changes weren't enough, Marvel introduced one more significant development: the continuing story. Previously, a typical issue of any comic book contained one self-contained story, or perhaps several briefer stories. Marvel realized the value in developing plots on a larger scale—stories which were too involved to wrap up in a single issue. Now it was not unusual to see a story arc run the span of two or three issues, or even to cross over into related titles. The old concept of the cliffhanger seemed a natural fit for the comic book medium.

Marvel Reborn

Such a creative torrent could not last forever, and Marvel's first great heyday began to peter out in the late sixties, precisely at the time when competitor DC would begin to see one of its most creative periods. Later, Marvel experienced a revival in the late seventies and early eighties, spurred by the work of Chris Claremont and John Byrne on the X-Men. And so it went through the years, with Marvel and DC in continuing competition.

The most newsworthy Marvel event of recent years was known as "Heroes Reborn." To boost declining sales on some of its flagship titles, Marvel entered into an unprecedented deal. The company contracted with two of Image Comics' leading forces: Jim Lee and Rob Liefeld. Under the terms of the contracts, Liefeld's and Lee's respective studios would assume control of four Marvel titles for twelve months, later extended to thirteen months, beginning in late 1996. The titles involved were *Captain America*, *The Avengers*, *Iron Man*, and *The Fantastic Four*. During Heroes Reborn, the affected Marvel characters were transported to a parallel universe, where their backgrounds and characteriza-

tions were drastically changed. Each title was relaunched with completely new volume numbering. At the end of this 13-month detour, all of the characters returned to the main Marvel Universe in a four-part limited series entitled *Heroes Reborn: The Return*, written by Peter David. All of the titles were relaunched yet again, so each of the four are currently incarnated as volume 3, giving Marvel the opportunity to start afresh. This remarkable marketing event succeeded fairly well. Most of the Heroes Reborn issues sold quite well, and the new, "volume 3" titles have elicited favorable reactions from the fans. The new titles are being handled expertly by some of the premiere writers and artists in the business. All four consistently rank among the top ten selling comics every month, making Heroes Return an unqualified success for Marvel and the readers alike.

Trouble On Wall Street

Marvel has experienced a variety of corporate owners over its lifetime, culminating in a 1989 purchase by investor Ron Perelman and a subsequent public stock offering in 1991. Today, Marvel Entertainment Group Inc. labors under Chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings, the victim of aggressive corporate acquisitions, a declining industry-wide market for comic books and sports cards, and mismanagement.[5]

Despite the financial problems of its parent company, Marvel's comic book business remains relatively strong. In any given month, the majority of titles on the list of top ten selling comics belong to Marvel. However, the company, which dominated the comics industry for decades, now battles neck and neck with DC for market share.[6] At the moment, Marvel publishes about forty ongoing series per month, compared to the fifty or sixty titles issued by DC.

In past decades, many fans were slavish followers of all things Marvel, yet today, Marvel-bashing is a favorite pastime. The publisher gained a somewhat deserved reputation in recent years for disregarding the interests of its fans and of independent comic shop owners. Customer outrage reached its peak when the company persisted in drawing out a convoluted and unsatisfying story line which revealed that the supposedly "real" Spider-Man was actually a laboratory-produced clone of the original. A fan-sponsored boycott prompted Marvel to fix the untidy mess, garnering the company a sarcastic front-page story in *The Wall Street Journal* for its troubles.[7] Marvel's willful insensitivity to retailers reached a pinnacle when the company bought a distributor called Heroes World and forced comics shops to buy Marvel product exclusively from the new subsidiary. The plan was a fiasco, and Marvel was forced to shut down Heroes World shortly thereafter.[8] The ramifications of the later incident should not be taken lightly, as it resulted in the complete destruction of major competitors in the wholesale market and contributed to the demise of many retailers. Throughout the period, Marvel acted as the proverbial 800 pound gorilla.

Marvel Today

Whatever problem Marvel currently faces, there is no doubt that its huge stable of copyrighted characters are a valuable licensing property, including video games, apparel, and much more. A variety of motion pictures have been made in the past, almost all of them critical and commercial flops. According to the Baseline II entertainment database, no fewer than sixteen Marvel-based movies are currently in development. Two movies have been released recently. "Blade," based on Marvel's *Blade the Vampire-Hunter* (1994-95), appeared on the wide screen in August, 1998, starring Wesley Snipes. "Nick Fury," based on the character of the same name, appeared as a Fox TV movie in May, 1998. Animated series have also been successful for Marvel in recent years, most notably the "X-Men," which ran on Fox for five seasons and is currently in syndicated reruns. Other recent shows include "Spider-Man" (five seasons), "The Marvel Action Hour" with the Fantastic Four and Iron Man (two seasons), "The Incredible Hulk" (two seasons), and "The Silver Surfer" (currently airing). An extensive series of original paperback novels, starring the X-Men, Spider-Man, Iron Man, and other Marvel characters is also published by Boulevard Books.

Marvel comics are presently divided into five editorial lines: Spider-Man, the X-Men, Marvel Presents, Marvel Imports, Marvel Heroes, and Strange Tales. Because of the popularity of the characters and the sheer number of titles released monthly, the Spider-Man and X-Men lines each consist of a family of titles. Marvel Presents comprises characters licensed from other media, notably Conan the Barbarian and, until recently, various Star Trek titles. Marvel Imports distributes a new line of Japanese Manga versions of Spider-Man and the X-Men. Marvel Heroes consists of all the super-hero titles which fall outside the X-Men and Spider-Man line-ups. A sixth line, dealing with horrow and supernatural titles was recently canceled.

THE X-MEN TITLES

The X-Men have been Marvel's best-selling characters for many years, inspiring a phenomenally popular animated series (which just ended a five-year run on the Fox network), a variety of popular video and arcade games, and an endless stream of merchandising, from action figures to canned pasta. The characters may gain a further boost in popularity following the long-awaited (or long-dreaded) live-action motion picture. The movie is slated to premiere in 1999, but as of this writing, filming has not yet begun.

The characters first appeared in 1963 in *The X-Men*, now called *Uncanny X-Men*. In its early years, the book was not among Marvel's most popular, despite many compelling, now classic stories, including a run penciled by legendary comics artist Neal Adams. The book was relegated to a reprint title in 1970, after sixty-six issues. To Marvel's surprise, sales of the reprints were fairly respectable as the X-Men were discovered by a new generation of readers. The publisher canceled the reprint series in early 1975, and the book was relaunched later that summer, with a brand new team of characters. The new team quickly became a major success. Under the guidance of writer Chris Claremont and artist/co-plotter John Byrne, *Uncanny X-Men* became a model of fine storytelling and craftsmanship which other books sought to emulate. Claremont remained as the principal writer for an unprecedented seventeen years, until leaving in 1991 following a series of editorial disputes involving creative control. Ironically, Claremont was recently rehired by Marvel in a senior editorial position as Creative Director.

The spectacular success of the new X-Men spawned an entire family of titles, beginning with *The New Mutants* in 1983. Additional titles include *X-Factor* (1986), *Wolverine* (1988), *Excalibur* (1988), a second series of *X-Men* (1991), *Unlimited X-Men* (1993), *Cable* (1993), *Generation X* (1994), *X-Man* (1995), and *Mutant X* (1998). *The New Mutants* was relaunched in 1991 as *X-Force*. Surprisingly few X-related titles have ceased over the years, most notably the ill-conceived *Dazzler* series (1981-1986), which starred a rhinestone-wearing, mutant disco singer who donned roller-skates to battle super-villains. Other cessations include *Marvel Comics Presents* (1988-1995), an anthology title which prominently featured Wolverine; the unusual *Professor X and the X-Men* (1995-1997), which retold early X-Men stories from a current perspective; *X-Men Adventures* (1994-1997), based on the Fox animated series; and various reprint titles, such as *X-Men Classic* (1986-1995) and *Early X-Men* (1994-1995). In recent months, Marvel has announced two new cancellations: *Excalibur* and *X-Factor*.

The main premise of the X-Men characters is that each is a mutant, born with special powers. The premiere 1963 issue proclaimed the team as "the world's most unusual teenagers." In the Marvel Universe, mutants are viewed as the next step in human evolution. As such, they are distrusted, feared, or even hated by normal humans. This long-standing theme serves as a metaphor for intolerance, prejudice, and bigotry, although that message is usually delivered with all the subtlety of a falling building. The various X-teams strive to defend a "world that hates and fears them," attempting to achieve the goal of peaceful coexistence between the two branches of humanity. This philosophy is referred to as "Xavier's dream," named after the team's founder and mentor, Professor Charles Xavier.[9] Xavier is opposed by another powerful mutant known as Magneto, who has developed into one of the most complex and fully realized villains in the Marvel universe. Magneto's solution to human-mutant conflict vacillates between the uncompromising subjugation of the entire human race and a sincere policy of complete separatism.

The original X-Men consisted of five mutant teenagers enrolled in a secret school where they learned to use their powers to help humanity. The teenagers learned under the watchful eye of Xavier (Professor X), himself a powerful mutant telepath. The five members were code-named Cyclops, Marvel Girl, the Beast, Angel, and Iceman. Students as super-heroes in training was a novel idea for its time. In the words of Marvel editor and comic book historian Peter Sanderson, "If the Fantastic Four was a family, and the Avengers a club, then the X-Men was a school." Later, the five students graduated, grew to young adulthood, and remained together as a super-hero team. Eventually, the original members disbanded, to be replaced by a younger, more international team, including members from Russia, Germany, Ireland, Japan, and Kenya. A variety of other mutant teams have also been formed over the years, as described below.

Uncanny X-Men is the original title. Its companion book is entitled *X-Men*, launched in 1991 to capitalize on the team's phenomenal popularity, as well as the unprecedented boom in comics collecting, which peaked shortly thereafter. Issue number 1 of the new title became the largest selling comic book of all time, with firm orders from retailers in excess of eight million copies. Over the years, Marvel has tried various

strategies to differentiate the two titles, but they remain essentially the same book, featuring the same characters, but produced by different creative teams and featuring different story lines. More significantly, readers wishing to follow Marvel's mutant exploits need to read both comics, because events in one interact heavily with the other. The two titles have elicited renewed interest from hard-core fans in recent months, following a radical shake-up in creative teams. The current writers are two of the hottest in the business: Joe Kelly and Steve Seagle.

X-Factor, the second-oldest title in the family, has undergone numerous incarnations since its creation in 1986. It began as a reunion of the original five members, who used the dubious gimmick of posing as anti-mutant bounty hunters who secretly recruited new mutants to Xavier's cause. Over the years, the team has changed to an organization of government sponsored super agents (with an ever-changing team roster), a group of undercover fugitives from the government, and a recent story line involving mutants from the future. For several years it has been the weakest of the X-titles, and its writer (Howard Mackie) is the butt of relentless criticism from hard-core fans. As this article was going to press, Marvel announced it would cancel *X-Factor* as of the October 1998 issue and replace it with a new title, *Mutant-X*.

X-Force is another title whose distinctiveness tends to be confusing to the uninitiated. The book's popularity has experienced a recent resurgence under the skilled guidance of writer John Francis Moore and Adam Pollina. For years, the team has represented the more radical branch of Xavier's dream. Its young members, guided by a more experienced, hardened mutant soldier named Cable, have believed in taking the fight to their enemies, rather than waiting for the bad guys to strike first. More recently, the young members have struck out on their own without Cable, and they are currently travelling across the country seeking to find themselves. At the moment, *X-Force* is quite possibly the most refreshingly original, highly entertaining book in the X-Men line-up.

In addition to regular appearances in *X-Force*, Cable has had his own title since 1993. The character has one of the more confusing histories in the X-family. He is the child of original X-Man Scott Summers (Cyclops) and his first wife, Maddie Pryor, who was actually a clone of Scott's true love, Jean Grey. (In true happy-ending fashion, Jean later became Scott's second wife.) As a baby, Cable was infected with a fatal "techno-virus," and his only means of salvation was to be sent into the distant future, where he could be cured by advanced technology. Cable grew to manhood in this bleak and violent future, where he became a leader in the rebellion against an immortal tyrant named Apocalypse. Eventually, Cable returned to the 20th Century, where he enjoys the curious distinction of being older than his natural parents. Here it should be mentioned that Cable's convoluted story is not atypical of the anguished, twisting, soap-opera-like history that lies at the heart of the X-Men's appeal.

Wolverine is the best-known and most popular of all the many X-men characters. He has had his own title since 1988 and has seen numerous guest appearances in virtually every title Marvel publishes. Wolverine is a fierce, feisty Canadian mutant, with superbly heightened animal senses, a super-human healing factor, and razor sharp, hardened bone claws which he can retract into his forearms. At one time, Wolverine's claws and skeleton were bonded with adamantium, the hardest known metal in the Marvel Universe. Several years ago, Wolverine nearly died when the villain Magneto forcefully extracted all the adamantium from Wolverine's body. Recent hints that Wolverine will somehow regain his adamantium continue to divide his ardent fans, who debate whether he is a better character with or without the metal enhancements.

Wolverine is also one of the most mysterious members of the X-Men's world. Because of brutal experimentation at the hands of a rogue government agency, Wolverine has spotty memories of his past, made all the more uncertain due to false memory implants. His mutant healing factor makes him extremely long-lived, but not even he knows how old he actually is. Wolverine was definitely active as a soldier during World War II, and he may even have lived as long ago as the early 1800s. In his long career he has served in several wars, worked as a secret agent during the cold war, trained in Japan as a samurai, and owned a bar in Southeast Asia. Currently, he has found a long-time home with the X-Men, a group he now considers to be his family.

Generation X relates the adventures of Marvel's youngest mutant team—teenagers enrolled at a special private school in Massachusetts, where they learn to utilize their powers more effectively. The idea of mutants-in-training has long been an essential ingredient in the X-Men mythos—first, with the original X-Men, next with the New Mutants, and now with Generation X.

The team consists of seven teenage mutants: four girls and three boys. Like many characters in the X-Men family, the teenagers of Generation X wrestle with

their personal demons, ranging from physical deformities to traumatized childhoods. Jubilee is a wise-cracking Chinese-American "Valley Girl" who shoots explosive fireworks from her hands. She was orphaned several years ago, whereupon she was taken in by the X-Men, trained by Wolverine, and ultimately transferred to the newly formed Gen-X school. Husk is the second female character, a serious-minded, determined, would-be leader whose body can assume the properties of other elements whenever she voluntarily sheds her outer skin. The third female member is the mysterious M, an aloof, troubled Algerian teenager with super-strength, the power of flight, and a brilliant mind. Readers have recently learned that M is actually a composite being, somehow formed by the merger of twin sisters Claudette and Nicole. The final female teammate is Penance, an apparently mute girl who was held captive for several years by an energy-absorbing mutant who used her life force as a source of sustenance. Penance, who possesses diamond-hard, razor-sharp skin, is gradually learning to trust her new-found companions and teachers.

The male line-up of Generation X consists of Skin, Chamber, and Synch. Skin, a Latino youth who grew up in the barrios of East Los Angeles, was born with six feet of additional, malleable skin, which he is only now learning to control. Chamber, the bitter, brooding Londoner, has powerful psionic powers, including telepathy telekinesis, and the power to fire energy blasts. Unfortunately, the first time his powers manifested, the unharnessed force blew away half his face and most of his chest, revealing the crackling energy that resides within his body. The horribly disfigured youth feels he is a dangerous misfit, even among his mutant compatriots. Synch, the final member of the Gen-X line-up, is probably the most well-adjusted of the lot. He is a polite, affable African-American teenager with the ability to emulate and amplify the mutant powers of those around him.

The teenagers find themselves under the watchful guidance of two mutant instructors: Sean Cassidy (Banshee) and Emma Frost (the White Queen). Cassidy is a former Interpol operative with the mutant ability to emit shattering sound waves when he screams. The White Queen is the most interesting character in the book. A powerful telepath with few compunctions about using her abilities for her own gain, Emma is also a reformed criminal. The White Queen was emotionally devastated when a group of young mutants she had been training for her own criminal purposes were brutally murdered by another super-villain. The guilt-stricken Emma then decided to dedicate her life to training other young mutants to fight on the side of the angels. Understandably, the former criminal and the former policeman seldom agree on the correct way to train the Generation X teens.

As with other teenage super-team books (DC's *Legion of Super-Heroes*, Image's *Gen13*), much of *Generation X*'s focus is on the interaction of team members, as they learn to be adults and struggle to cope with their powers. Several years ago, a live action Gen-X movie aired on the Fox Network, billed as the pilot for an upcoming TV series. Since that time, Fox has announced no definite plans about the show.

The remaining mainstream titles are *X-Man*, *X-Men Unlimited*, and *Excalibur*. *X-Man*, the newest title in the family, features an extremely powerful teenage mutant telepath who was accidently transported to Earth from an alternate reality which no longer exists. *Excalibur* follows the adventures of a European-based mutant team, whose members include several former X-Men. This is the poorest selling of all the X-Men titles, and Marvel has announced it will cancel the series later this year. *X-Men Unlimited* is a quarterly book designed to publish lengthier stories which showcase individual members of the X-Men family. Marvel has recently begun publishing *X-Men: The Manga*, which features original stories in Japanese comic book style, but which bears no continuity with the mainstream X-Men world.

Amazingly, sales of all the X-Men titles have remained strong, with the exception of the aforementioned *Excalibur*. All other titles rank consistently among the industry's top twenty books, including the ill-fated *X-Factor*, routinely appear in the top five. With so many long-running titles, it is no surprise that some books become stale from time to time, but there are few signs that the X-Men are victims of overexposure.

The Spider-Man Titles

Just as Superman is DC's most recognizable icon, Spider-Man is by far Marvel's most identifiable character. That recognition has been heightened over the years by recurring television exposure: a 1967-1970 animated series (whose theme song is indelibly imprinted on the minds of the baby boomer generation); a live-action TV movie in 1977, which resulted in an ongoing series staring Nicholas Hammond in the title role; a second popular animated series, "Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends," which began in 1981; and a surprisingly good third animated series which ran for five years on

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the Fox Kids network in the mid-nineties. "The Amazing Spider-Man" comic strip, written by Stan Lee himself, has also appeared in daily and weekend newspapers continuously since 1977.

In addition to this recognition factor, Spider-Man is one of the most exciting characters in the Marvel Universe, with an enviable tradition of outstanding stories, an extensive supporting cast, and a large gallery of colorful villains. Spider-Man's origin has become an enduring comic book fable. While attending a scientific exhibition, high school bookworm Peter Parker is accidentally bitten by an irradiated spider. The arachnid's bite gives Peter the proportionate strength, speed, and agility of a spider, the ability to cling to surfaces such as walls and ceilings, and a mysterious "spider sense" which warns him of impending danger. The teenager also uses his impressive scientific skills to invent an unbreakable adhesive webbing, a portable web shooter, and an electronic homing device attuned to his spider sense. Peter decides to use his new-found powers to gain fame and fortune as a TV star. One day the television studio is robbed, but the self-centered Spider-Man refuses to help capture the fleeing culprit. Later, by sheer coincidence, the same thief breaks into Peter's home and in a botched burglary attempt, kills the boy's beloved Uncle Ben. From this devastating incident, the guilt-ridden teenager learns that "with great power comes great responsibility," and he dedicates his life to fighting crime.

Much of Spider-Man's strong fan support can be attributed to three factors. First, he has unusual powers. Instead of being a hulking muscleman, he is a slender, 160-pound youth of average height, who can nevertheless bench-press a bulldozer. More often than not, his success in beating super-villains stems from his speed, agility, and sharp wits. Second is Peter Parker's richly developed personal life, a hallmark of the books since his first appearance in 1963. At the moment Peter is married to college sweetheart Mary Jane Watson, and the couple have returned to graduate school after an absence of several years. Recently Peter has weathered the death (by natural causes) of his long-suffering Aunt May and the apparent death of his new-born daughter. (The infant is actually alive, but has been kidnapped by Spider-Man's arch-villain, the Green Goblin.) Peter and Mary Jane share a strong, loving marriage, strained by the pain of recent events, the constant demands of life as Spider-Man, and more mundane concerns such as personal finances.

A third factor is Spider-Man's complex personality. Peter is clearly obsessed with his responsibilities as Spider-Man because of the oppressive guilt for which he can never seem to forgive himself. At the same time, while fighting crime and spinning webs, he is typically carefree, firing off an endless stream of quips, to the constant annoyance of his foes. Although he appears to be the polar opposite of the grim Batman, the two characters are alike in one significant way: both heroes feel most real when wearing their costume. Spider-Man's most notable trait is his indomitable spirit, which has allowed him to survive and triumph against crushing situations and seemingly impossible odds.[10] It's hard not to like and admire the guy.

At present, Marvel publishes six ongoing Spider-Man series, including the quarterly *Spider-Man Unlimited* (1993-) and the new *Spider-Man: The Manga* release (1998-). The core of the Spider-Man franchise consists of four monthly titles: *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1963-); *The Spectacular Spider-Man* (1976-); *Peter Parker, Spider-Man* (1990-); and the newest addition, *The Sensational Spider-Man* (1996-). As these otherwise needless adjectives may suggest, little difference exists among the four books. In essence, they represent four installments of the same series, told by four different creative teams. Each title is supposedly self-contained, which is usually true so far as the plots themselves are concerned, but events in one title have a profound impact on events in the others, making it difficult for readers to ignore any books in the Spider-family. The Spider-Man line-up also includes at least one full-blown inter-title crossover per year.

In the past, Marvel had attempted to differentiate among various Spider-titles. For example, *The Spectacular Spider-Man* focused more on Peter Parker's personal life, while the now defunct *Web of Spider-Man* (1985-1995) dealt with darker, more realistic adventures. Such distinctions are no longer the case.

The books have also alienated long-time fans in recent years. For seemingly endless months, Spider-Man was portrayed in an atypically depressing mode of despair and self pity. This was followed by the infamous Spider-clone saga, which established a story line of byzantine complexity that not even the writers could keep straight, and which strove to rewrite much of the character's known history. Ensuing fan outrage led to a boycott which made headline news, forcing Marvel to retreat from its ill-advised policies. More recently, the Spider-Man titles have fallen back on standard action-oriented stories, which are competent, but not outstanding.

In an effort to revitalize its flagship property, Marvel recently announced a major shake-up in the Spi-

der-Man line. Three titles—*Spider-Man Unlimited*, *The Spectacular Spider-Man*, and *The Sensational Spider-Man*—will be canceled in September, 1998. The remaining two titles—*The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Peter Parker, Spider-Man*—will be relaunced with new volume numbering as "number 1" issues. The new titles will be preceded by a blockbuster crossover in which Spider-Man searches for his kidnapped daughter.

THE FANTASTIC FOUR (THIRD SERIES, 1998-)

The comic book which kicked off the Marvel Age in 1961 was the brilliantly innovative *Fantastic Four*. The book represented Stan Lee's first attempt at crafting three-dimensional super-heroes, with distinctive personalities and mundane, real-world problems.[11] Co-created by Jack Kirby, the first issue tells the story of Reed Richards, a brilliant astrophysicist who is working to develop a moon rocket. He decides to take the rocket on its maiden voyage, along with test pilot and former college roommate Ben Grimm; Reed's fiancee, Susan Storm; and Sue's teenage brother Johnny. While in space, the quartet is bombarded by mysterious cosmic rays. The radiation transforms each of them into a being with amazing powers. Reed, who adopts the code name Mr. Fantastic, develops the ability to stretch his entire body as though it were an indestructible form of Silly Putty. Ben, hereafter known as the Thing, transforms into a hideous monster with rock-like orange skin and tremendous strength. Johnny, a.k.a. the Human Torch, can now transform his body into living flame, shoot fireballs, and fly. And Sue, who calls herself the Invisible Girl (later "Woman"), can turn invisible and can also project powerful force fields.

From its first appearance, Marvel billed the title as "The World's Greatest Comic!" The powerful quartet often faced dangers of galactic proportions. In addition to their super-human abilities, Reed Richards is also recognized as one of the two most brilliant scientists in the Marvel Universe. His competitor is also the Fantastic Four's most implacable foe, Dr. Doom. Doom is easily the most interesting of Marvel's villains, but he is also representative of the many colorful antagonists introduced in the pages of this comic, from Galactus to the Impossible Man.

Despite *The Fantastic Four*'s preeminent position in the Marvel Universe, the title has not always sold well. In recent years, it seldom placed in the top fifty of best selling comics. During 1997's "Heroes Reborn" marketing event, interest in the Fantastic Four was rekindled by the hot writing team of Jim Lee and Brandon Choi. The book was penciled by Jim Lee protege Brett Booth, with covers by Lee. Immediately, the book shot up to the top five list. The new "Heroes Return" version (designated as Volume 3) remains just as popular. It was launched by former *Uncanny X-Men* writer Scott Lobdell, with art by fan favorite Alan Davis. Industry legend Chris Claremont has now assumed the writing chores, with strong art from Salvador Larocca.

Claremont is renowned for his ability to portray complex, distinctive characters, to spin intricate, science fiction plots, and to expertly intermingle laid-back humor and riveting suspense. So far, he is bringing all of these skills to *The Fantastic Four* in ample measures. Another hallmark of Claremont's writing is his portrayal of strong female characters who play a central role in plot development. Already his treatment of such Marvel favorites as the Invisible Woman and the She-Hulk is leaving readers of *The Fantastic Four* waiting for more. The creative team is doing an outstanding job on this title, and sales remain very strong. It seems clear that Marvel hopes to return *The Fantastic Four* to its former heights as "the World's Greatest Comic."

On television, the Fantastic Four have enjoyed three separate animated series. The first ran from 1967 to 1970, with Jack Kirby himself assisting on the art. The second, which premiered in 1978, replaced the Human Torch with a new creation, Herbie the Robot, due to contractual restrictions. The third animated series, called the "Marvel Action Hour," ran for two seasons in the mid-1990s.

CAPTAIN AMERICA (THIRD SERIES, 1998-)

Created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby during the Golden Age, Captain America was one of Marvel's first super-heroes, and he remains one of the company's most enduring characters. He was one of the first, and best known, in a long line of patriotic super-heroes of the forties and fifties. Cap exploded on the comics scene in early 1941, in the pages of *Captain America Comics* no. 1. The issue's cover featured Cap in his vivid, red-white-and-blue uniform, delivering a tooth-jarring punch to none other than Adolf Hitler himself.[12] This was a remarkable event in a country which still harbored strong isolationist tendencies. In the words of comics historian Joe Brancatelli, Captain America represented "one of the foremost manifestations of American patriotism in World War II."[13] Gerard Jones states the matter more bluntly, calling Cap, "America's most powerful piece of wartime comic

book propaganda."[14] The book was wildly popular, especially with American GIs. Throughout the war years, Cap aided US troops in battling a long succession of Axis villains, spies, and criminal masterminds, including the bloodthirsty Nazi super-agent known as the Red Skull.

Captain America's origin is well known in comics circles. Skinny 4-F reject Steve Rogers volunteers for a dangerous army experiment. He is injected with a secret formula which permanently grants him enhanced strength, speed, agility, and stamina, making him the first of the government's intended army of "super soldiers." Unfortunately, the project's lead scientist is murdered by Nazi agents, and the formula's secret dies with him. Throughout his long history, Cap is never far from his trademark shield, made from an unreplicable alloy of rare and indestructible metals. The shield serves Cap in a traditional defensive mode, but also acts as an offensive weapon, which he throws with unerring accuracy.

The original *Captain America* series was canceled in 1949, due to waning interest in the super-hero genre. The character was revived briefly in the 1950s, but remained largely dormant until Stan Lee dusted him off again in 1964. To explain how a World War II vet could still function as a spry super-hero, Lee concocted a plane crash which froze Cap in an arctic glacier following the war. He was billed as "the living legend of World War II." Captain America went on the play a leading role in Marvel's new Avengers title and ultimately to have a long standing book of his own. Over the years, Captain America has been subjected to numerous plot twists at the hands of dozens of leading writers and artists. Some of the book's best writing has been done by Stan Lee, Steve Englehart, Roger Stern, and Mark Waid. He has been depicted by innumerable Marvel artists, including excellent work by Sal Buscema and John Byrne, but the definitive Captain America was drawn by Jack Kirby throughout his Silver Age run.

Despite the fact that Captain America can not fly, is not invulnerable, and can not bend steel in his bare hands, in the Marvel Universe he remains super-herodom's preeminent spokesman. He is respected by his fellow heroes and widely revered by the general populace. His unique status arises from his legendary service during WW II, decades of combat experience, dauntless courage, natural leadership ability, and most of all, his unswerving sense of morality. He consistently finds ways to overcome the most insurmountable obstacles and defeat the most powerful foes. No matter how hopeless the cause, Captain America always finds a way to triumph somehow.

During Marvel's 1997 "Heroes Reborn" experiment, work on *Captain America* was taken over by Image Comics' "Wunderkind" Rob Liefeld. The results were spectacularly bad. Liefeld's ridiculous plotting and absurd art drove fans and industry insiders alike to react with outrage, disbelief, and scorn. As a result, Marvel soon canceled Liefeld's thirteen-issue contract and turned the book over to award winning writer James Robinson. Following Marvel's recent "Heroes Return" mega-event, the new *Captain America* title is being ably handled by the team of Mark Waid and Ron Garney, who had briefly collaborated on a critically acclaimed Cap story line earlier in the nineties. Waid is a true aficionado of Marvel history, and his version of Cap captures the essence of this enduring comics icon. Waid is sometimes labelled as a writer of "old-fashioned" stories, but his approach is perfectly suited to the character of Captain America. In September, 1988, Marvel introduced a companion title, *Captain America: Sentinel of Liberty*, which chronicles the hero's earlier adventures.

Over the decades, Captain America has also starred in other media, including a 1940s movie serial, a mid-1960s cartoon series called "Marvel Super Heroes," a 1990 motion picture, and two utterly forgettable made-for-TV movies released in 1979.

THE AVENGERS (THIRD SERIES, 1998-)

Every super-hero Universe must have its all-star team to handle the biggest threats. DC boasts the Justice League of America, while Marvel calls on the Avengers. The title premiered in 1963 and has appeared continuously ever since, with an ever-changing team line-up. During the 1997 "Heroes Reborn" event, the title was turned over to Rob Liefeld, with unsatisfactory results. After Liefeld was fired, the title was rescued by Marvel veteran Walt Simonson. Today, the new *Avengers* relaunch is being handled by award-winning writer Kurt Busiek and classic Avengers artist George Perez.

Busiek left his readers guessing for several months about the reconstituted team's final roster, but he has assembled an excellent mix of Marvel stalwarts and relative newcomers. At present, the team consists of Iron Man, Thor, Captain America, Hawkeye, the Scarlet Witch, and the Vision, all of whom were long-time members of the original team. Additional members

include Warbird (formerly Ms. Marvel), who was a card-carrying Avenger for several years in the 1980s, and newcomers Justice and Firestar. The latter two are former members of another, younger Marvel team known as the New Warriors.

Busiek is renowned for his encyclopedic knowledge of Marvel history, and he has brought much of the fun, excitement, and wonderment back to *The Avengers*. Likewise, industry great George Perez excels at drawing team books, and so far he's doing an excellent job with his new assignment.

Traditionally, team-books have held the potential to be among the most dazzling in the super-hero genre, but have not always lived up to that promise. Now, with a revamped Justice League from DC, and a revived Avengers from Marvel, these premiere super-teams have generated an overwhelming response from new and old fans alike. The Avengers is, without question, one of the very best titles in Marvel's current line-up.

IRON MAN (THIRD SERIES, 1998-)

Tony Stark, a brilliant inventor and self-made billionaire defense contractor, is seriously wounded while travelling on business in Vietnam. Stark realizes he has a piece of shrapnel lodged perilously close to his heart, and that he could die at any moment. He is captured by the Chinese and forced to work on high tech weapons for them. Using their laboratory facilities, the ingenious Stark creates an iron chest plate which stabilizes his heart condition. Fastening on a desperate escape plan, he builds a miraculous suit of armor, complete with jet boots and powerful repulsor rays. Thus is Iron Man born.

Iron Man became one of Marvel's original Silver Age heroes, but in the ensuing years, both he and Tony Stark underwent myriad changes, including a long bout with alcoholism and financial ruin. Some changes were both dramatic and engaging, while others were absurd mistakes. It reached the point where fans became disgusted with the radical transformation of their favorite hero, because those changes resulted in a character who was hardly recognizable. The "Heroes Reborn" contract offered Marvel a means of undoing some of its recent damage to the character. During the thirteen-month transition period, the new *Iron Man* was handling admirably—perhaps the best of any Heroes Reborn character. The title was initially written by Scott Lobdell, with art by Jim Lee, then handed over to Jeph Loeb and Whilce Portacio. Following the success of these efforts, the Heroes Return relaunch was given to award-winning writer Kurt Busiek. It is worth mentioning that Marvel offered Busiek his choice of any book, including the plum opportunity to work on *Fantastic Four*. Busiek's first choice was *Iron Man*, long one of the writer's favorite characters. Under Busiek's skillful hand, *Iron Man* has regained its rank among Marvel's best selling titles.

DAREDEVIL (1964-)

Marvel's Daredevil bears no relation to the well-known 1940s character of the same name published by Lev Gleason's Comic House. The modern Daredevil is a mainstay character of the Marvel Universe, introduced in the early sixties along with Spider-Man, the X-Men, and the Avengers. The book has been published without break since its debut in 1964. Daredevil the character was blinded in an accident as a young boy. The accident, involving radioactive waste, gave the boy superbly keen senses of hearing, touch, and smell, as well as a "radar sense" which allows him to detect objects around him without sight. Although his heightened senses provide a huge advantage, Daredevil has no other super-human powers. Like Batman, his DC counterpart, Daredevil developed exceptional acrobatic and martial arts skills through a lifetime of training.

Over its history, the tone of *Daredevil* has run the spectrum from stunningly grim to light-hearted. Some of Marvel's most memorable stories have appeared in the pages of *Daredevil*, including many created by industry legend Frank Miller. The book's present incarnation is considerably less dark than in the past, with Daredevil currently characterized as a fairly typical wisecracking hero. Much of the title's interest has long centered on the personal life of lawyer Matt Murdoch, Daredevil's alter-ego. The current supporting cast includes Matt's girlfriend Karen Page, a late-night radio host; his best friend and law partner Foggy Nelson; and senior law partner Rosalind Sharpe, who is undoubtedly the book's most intriguing character. Daredevil has been one of Marvel's poorer selling titles in recent years, despite admirable work by writers such as D.G. Chichester and Joe Kelly. In September, 1998, Marvel will launch *Daredevil* with new volume numbering (as a "number one" issue) and exciting new creative team.

– MICHAEL R. LAVIN –

THE INCREDIBLE HULK (SECOND SERIES, 1968-)

Next to Spider-Man and the X-Men, the Hulk is undoubtedly the most universally recognizable character in the Marvel pantheon. In large part, this recognition is due to the long-running live action television series which starred the late Bill Bixby. Although the 1977-1981 series is long gone from TV, a new generation of viewers has discovered the Hulk through reruns on the Sci-Fi Channel and through a popular animated series on the Fox network. The Hulk also appeared in two other animated series: a syndicated cartoon called "Marvel Super Heroes" in 1966 and his own NBC cartoon in 1981.

The Incredible Hulk first appeared in 1962, but was canceled after six issues. In 1964, the Hulk became a featured character in an anthology title called *Tales to Astonish*. He shared billing first with Giant Man, then the Sub-Mariner, but beginning with issue no. 102 (1968), the book became a single-character series and the title was changed to *The Incredible Hulk*.

The Hulk is another character created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in the early sixties. He is a massive, brutish-looking green-skinned monster, the strongest mortal in the Marvel Universe. The Hulk gained his powers when, as brilliant scientist Bruce Banner, he was caught in the vicinity of a "gamma bomb" explosion. In the thirty-plus years of Hulk comics, the character has undergone many transformations: from childlike, rampaging beast to cunning, brutal monster, to brilliant scientist locked in a monster's body. Peter David, who wrote *The Incredible Hulk* for eleven years, explored every aspect of the character's development. Readers learned, for example, that the transformation which takes place after someone has been exposed to gamma radiation is dependent upon that individual's personality. In the Hulk's case, Bruce Banner was physically and emotionally abused as a child by his murderous father, and his lifetime of repressed anger lies at the heart of his monstrous transformations.

At the time of Marvel's Heroes Reborn project, the company's senior editors had decided to cancel *The Incredible Hulk*. The title never made it into the top ten selling comics, but it consistently ranked in the low twenties, giving it respectable sales even by Marvel's standards. Nevertheless, the title would have been canceled if not for an extensive write-in campaign orchestrated by ardent fans.

A new creative team has recently taken over the reins on *The Incredible Hulk*, including industry legend John Byrne. After eleven years of solid, often spectacular accomplishments, it will be difficult to fill Peter David's shoes, but if Kelly's past work is any indication, the Hulk will continue to be one of Marvel's most interesting characters.

Marvel also rolled out a second Hulk title in mid-1998. Called *The Rampaging Hulk*, it features new stories set in the early days of the Hulk's career, when he was a savage, uncontrollable creature with a vocabulary limited to such pithy declarations as "Hulk Smash!"

SILVER SURFER (SECOND SERIES, 1987-)

One of Marvel's great strengths throughout the Silver Age was its ability to create grandiose science fiction/fantasy stories of galaxy-spanning proportions, most notably in the pages of *The Mighty Thor* and *The Fantastic Four*. One of the few remaining titles based on that magnificent legacy is *The Silver Surfer*.

Jack Kirby created the character of the Silver Surfer as a last minute addition to *Fantastic Four* no. 48, in 1966. In this story, a gigantic, god-like being named Galactus appears on Earth, with the intention of destroying the planet to feed his insatiable appetite for life-energy. Galactus sends an advance scout to Earth, a naked, humanoid figure with a bald head and gleaming silver skin who calls himself the Silver Surfer. The name is derived from the character's unique mode of transportation—a "cosmically powered" silver surfboard, which the protagonist uses to fly across the galaxy. In this classic *Fantastic Four* story, the seemingly emotionless Surfer is touched by the compassion of a blind woman who bravely tries to deter him from his awful mission. In turn, the Surfer betrays his master, and as punishment, he is condemned by Galactus to remain within Earth's atmosphere, never again to soar through space.[15]

From 1968 to 1970, the Silver Surfer appeared in his own comic book, where he served the role of "stranger in a strange land." This short-lived series featured the Surfer embroiled in various adventures that typically found him marveling at mankind's capacity for cruelty and self-destruction. The Surfer's noble moralizing seemed well-suited for its time, making the character a tremendous hit on college campuses and garnering the comic several industry awards. Unfortunately, this one-note, melodramatic theme wore thin fairly quickly, and the book was canceled due to poor sales.

This first series revealed the Surfer's tragic origin. His name had been Norrin Radd, and he lived on the idyllic, scientifically advanced planet of Zenn-La.

When the voracious Galactus appeared in the vicinity, on a collision course to consume Zenn-La, Norrin Radd struck a bargain with the immortal being: if Galactus would spare Zenn-La, Norrin Radd would forgo his humanity and agree to become Galactus's herald, helping him to find uninhabited planets to devour. Virtually every commentator who discusses the Silver Surfer makes note of the Christ symbolism in the story.[16] The Surfer sacrificed himself not once, but twice: first he willingly abandons his humanity and the woman he loves to save the world of his birth; later he sacrifices his joyous freedom to travel through space in order to save the Earth. From the very beginning, Marvel stressed the character's nobility, innocence, and deep compassion for others. It is no coincidence that one of the Surfer's most implacable foes is Mephisto, a supernatural collector of souls and Marvel's analog for the Judeo-Christian Satan.

In 1987, Marvel launched a new *Silver Surfer* title which returned the character to the stars where he belonged. Here he typically battles threats on a galactic scale, such as the would-be universe conqueror, Thanos. The title is presently written by J.M. DeMatteis, who is best known for crafting some of the darkest stories in Spider-Man's long career. DeMatteis's somber, deliberate style is perfectly suited for the introspective, often self-pitying Surfer. The book tends to be both serious and wordy and is definitely an acquired taste, but it continues to have a dedicated following. A variety of artists have worked on *The Silver Surfer* in recent years, but the quality of the art has been consistently high nevertheless.

Marvel clearly intends to support this title, as evidenced by the premiere of a new "Silver Surfer" cartoon on the Fox network earlier this year. Marvel has also optioned the character for a possible motion picture.

Alpha Flight (Second Series, 1997-)

Alpha Flight originally ran for 130 issues, from 1983 to 1994, but was relaunched by Marvel in early 1997. The Alphas are a team of government-sponsored Canadian super-heroes who work for the mysterious Department H. The core team currently consists of original members Guardian, Vindicator, and Puck, together with new young members Murmur, Radius, and Flex. Although the new book consistently sells in the top fifty, it is not hugely popular. However, *Alpha Flight* has always enjoyed a strong following of die-hard fans (both US and Canadian), and most of them seem extremely pleased with the direction taken by the new team.[17]

Most of the credit for *Alpha Flight*'s current success goes to writer and long-time fan favorite Steve Seagle. Seagle is noted for his richly textured plots, and he does not disappoint here. He manages to keeps readers guessing by introducing a variety of ongoing mysteries, such as "What happened to some of the original team members?" "Why is Guardian fifteen years younger than when we last saw him?" and "What is Department H's secret agenda?" The Alpha Flight team made its first appearance in 1978/1979 issues of *Uncanny X-Men*, and the book maintains tenuous ties to the more popular X-Men family of titles, largely through the character of Wolverine, who was an original Alpha Flight member.

Thunderbolts (1997-)

Thunderbolts, which made its debut in February, 1997 (with a cover date of April), became an instant success due to the skills of award-winning writer Kurt Busiek. The book is based on an unusual premise: a group of super-powered villains adopt new identities and pose as a super-hero team in order to gain pubic confidence and accomplish a nefarious secret agenda. The title's fan appeal is largely based on two factors: the interaction of the main characters, several of whom find it surprisingly satisfying to gain new-found respect as heroes; and the twists and turns of Busiek's plotting, which leave readers continually guessing what the future may hold. As of issue number 10, the team's secret is revealed to the populace of the Marvel Universe, yet the series remains as intriguing as ever. The book is ably penciled by veteran comic artist Mark Bagley.

Deadpool (1997-)

Another fairly new, yet immediately popular title, *Deadpool* recounts the adventures of Wade Wilson (Deadpool), a costumed free-lance killer for hire. Wilson's distinction from run-of-the mill hit men is that experimental medical treatments, undergone to cure terminal cancer, left him with a powerful natural healing factor. Unfortunately, the treatment also left him horribly disfigured, necessitating a mask to hide his features. The character made his first appearance in a 1991 issue of *The New Mutants*, an X-Men title. At the time he was a fairly standard martial arts/mercenary

– Michael R. Lavin –

character with big guns, but his stream-of-consciousness wisecracks gained him a broad fan following as the "merc with a mouth." Deadpool enjoyed two successful limited series before gaining a monthly title of his own.

The character is most comparable to Hitman, an anti-hero from the DC Universe. Both books are darkly, wildly funny, but the similarities end there. While Hitman is a killer with a moral code, Deadpool is mentally unstable and probably insane. What makes the character sympathetic are his struggle to deal with grotesque physical deformity and his halting, half-hearted efforts to reform. Much of the character's emotional conflict results from his unrequited love for Siryn, a female super-hero from the X-Men family. The love-smitten Deadpool struggles unsuccessfully to change his criminal ways for Siryn's sake, but he is exceedingly uncomfortable with the hero's role. Writer Joe Kelly handles the character with a blend of sensitivity and outrageous humor, making *Deadpool* a unique and fascinating title.

Ka-Zar (Second Series, 1997-)

Like all pulp publishers of the 1930s, Martin Goodman was not above reworking a usable story idea. Ka-Zar, Goodman's low-rent version of Tarzan, ran first as the hero of his own short-lived pulp fiction magazine, then as a recurring character in early Timely comics. Stan Lee revived the character in a 1965 issue of *Uncanny X-Men*, but with a twist. Lee combined the Tarzan-like jungle lord with one of his favorite fictional themes: a hidden land of living dinosaurs, reminiscent of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*. Lee's Ka-Zar is Lord Kevin Plunder, the son of a British explorer who discovered the Savage Land, a mysterious tropical valley hidden in the polar wastes of Antarctica. Young Kevin is stranded in the Savage Land, where he is befriended by a young sabretooth tiger. The two become inseparable, and Kevin grows up to become the wise and just lord of the Savage Land.

Ka-Zar is definitely a lesser character in the Marvel Universe, though he has made guest appearances in virtually every Marvel title imaginable and has starred in no fewer than four ongoing series of his own. The current title, created by award-winner Mark Waid and drawn by fan favorite Andy Kubert, is genuinely likeable, in part for its large doses of humor. Ka-Zar is married to Shanna O'Hara, his long-time love interest, and the two now have an infant son. Ka-Zar's wife happens to be also known as Shanna the She-Devil. She is, of course, a blatant rip-off of Sheena of the Jungle, and countless other female Tarzans. Shanna abhors modern civilization and cherishes the primitive tranquility of the Savage Land. Lord Kevin, it seems, has tired of life without Walkmans and microwaves, setting up some lighthearted marital discord. Although Shanna is one of the more interesting, multi-faceted female characters in the Marvel pantheon, she is typically drawn wearing the skimpiest of leather bikinis.

Added to the mix is Parnival Plunder, Kevin's scheming, cowardly, and amiably villainous brother, whose schemes have included the use of alien technology to convert Manhattan into very expensive prehistoric real estate. Waid is an excellent storyteller, and despite the title's humorous tone, he brings to it a sufficient touch of hazard and suspense, making for a satisfying read.

As this article was going to press, Marvel announced that *Ka-Zar* will be canceled at issue no. 20.

Quicksilver (1997-)

Quicksilver is the Marvel equivalent to DC's the Flash—a super-hero whose primary power is the ability to move at incredibly fast speeds. He is a mutant, which, according to the Marvel mythos, means he was born with his powers, as the X-Men were. Quicksilver is nowhere near as fast as DC's Flash, but he is unquestionably one of the fastest beings in the Marvel Universe.

One of the factors which makes Quicksilver an inherently interesting character is his diverse ties to many other Marvel creations. He made his first appearance way back in *Uncanny X-Men* #4 (1964) as an essentially noble, reluctant villain of the X-Men. Marvel later revealed that Quicksilver (whose adopted name is Pietro Maximoff) is the son of Magneto (Erik Lehnsherr), the X-Men's greatest enemy. Quicksilver's twin sister is the Scarlet Witch, presently a member of the Avengers. Pietro himself was a long-time member of the Avengers and a brief member of X-Factor, but is currently inactive with either super-hero team. Finally, Quicksilver's wife Crystal has strong ties to the Fantastic Four and the Avengers and belongs to a super-team known as the Inhumans. Such a complex genealogy ensures that each issue of *Quicksilver* is chock full of guest stars and interwoven plots.

A second, even more interesting characteristic of the book is Quicksilver's less-than-endearing personality. He is headstrong, arrogant, brusque, impatient,

and quick to anger. Portraying such a potentially obnoxious character in a sympathetic light has always been a challenge. In the pages of *X-Factor*, writer Peter David depicted Pietro as supremely frustrated, surrounded by people that, to him, think and move in slow motion. For a time, Quicksilver even underwent therapy and practiced slow-motion exercises to help him learn patience.

The current *Quicksilver* series finds the hero in a situation completely different from his past exploits. As a debt of honor, he has agreed to the request of the High Evolutionary to become the leader of the Knights of Wundagore. The High Evolutionary is a brilliant scientist who genetically alters animals into "New Men," creatures who walk upright, speak, and think like humans. The Knights of Wundagore are an elite cadre of New Men—transformed tigers, rams, dogs, alligators, and even a rat—who follow the chivalrous code of King Arthur's Round Table. Quicksilver, never comfortable as a team player, now finds himself in a leadership role, with the Knights looking to him for guidance and inspiration.

The book has been handled by two of the most skillful writers in the industry: Tom Peyer (*Legion of Super-Heroes*), who created the series, and John Ostrander (*The Spectre*), who took over when Peyer stepped down. Both writers have focused on good, old-fashioned adventure, and intermingled, but not overly complicated plots. The title deals with serious issues, such as Quicksilver's shaky marriage and his team's faltering confidence in his commitment to lead, but it is not oppressively dark by any means. In essence, the book is an intriguing mixture of superhero action and anthropomorphic fantasy. Although readers were dubious of the bizarre story line when the series premiered, many have been won over by its solid, suspenseful writing, believable characterization, and by the charming Knights of Wundagore themselves.

HEROES FOR HIRE (1997-)

A group of Marvel's second-string heroes, banding together to work as fee-based adventurers, is the premise behind *Heroes For Hire* (*H4H*). However, because they are heroes, the group's members find themselves taking on jobs for free as often as working under contract. The book is an offshoot of an earlier title, *Power Man and Iron Fist* (1974-1986), in which two of *H4H*'s main characters operated a similar business.

Composition of the team has varied considerably in its short history to date. Founding members include Iron Fist (Danny Rand), a super-powered martial arts expert, and the swashbuckling Black Knight, who rides a winged horse and wields an enchanted sword. Other members include the White Tiger (a fierce, genetically altered female tiger with human characteristics), Ant-Man, who can reduce himself to the size of an insect and communicate electronically with ants, and Power Man (Luke Cage), who possesses super strength and skin impervious to bullets. Luke Cage is also notable for being one of the first African-American superheroes in comic book history (introduced in 1972) and for being the source of actor Nicolas Cage's stage name. (It's true!)

Heroes For Hire is ably written by John Ostrander, best known for more serious work, such as DC's *The Spectre* and a remarkable twelve-issue Civil War-era mini-series called *The Kents*. In *H4H*, Ostrander shows he is equally capable of handling lighthearted fare. Although the title represents mainstream super-hero action, it also possesses strong comedic elements, often provided by such wonderful Ostrander captions as, "Oooh! Ominous!" He opens one issue with, "You are the White Tiger... Okay, okay, you're not the White Tiger. It was a narrative ploy designed to create a deeper sense of involvement and... Oh, skip it."

Fan interest in *Heroes For Hire* was slow to develop, but the series is becoming more popular (and better) with each new issue, despite the fact that its main characters are not major draws. The book provides plenty of action, coupled with strong stories which are not overwhelmed by the humorous undercurrent.

CONAN (1997-)

Following the cancellation of Marvel's various Star Trek titles, Conan remains one of the few licensed characters currently published by Marvel. Conan is the creation of pulp fiction writer Robert E. Howard. Howard's Conan stories appeared exclusively in *Weird Tales* magazine, from 1932 to 1936.[18] A barbarian of unparalleled strength, courage, and ferocity in battle, Conan's stories are set in the mythical Hyborian Age, a fantasy world of wizards, demons, and epic heroes set approximately 10,000 years in earth's past. Conan himself is a primitive, brutal (even ruthless) fatalist, with an unquenchable appetite for wine, women, and adventure. Aside from his courage and prowess, Conan's heroic qualities stem from his firm sense of loyalty and honor. He travels the ancient world as a thief, pirate,

and mercenary, ultimately becoming the king of a vast empire. Of greatest interest is the fact that Conan's personality matures as he grows from his teen years to middle age, learning judgment, patience, and even a bit of wisdom along the way.

Although all of the Conan stories were reprinted in hardcover in the 1950s, Conan found a new generation of fans in the mid-1960s when Lancer reissued Howard's original stories in paperback format, including previously unpublished Howard stories which were completed by fantasy writer L. Sprague de Camp. At the movies, the sword-and-sorcery genre skyrocketed in 1982 with the first of two feature films starring Arnold Schwartzenegger as Conan. In the early 1990s, Conan debuted on television in two short-lived animated series: "Conan the Adventurer" and "Conan and the Young Warriors." Today, Conan remains as popular as ever with a new live-action syndicated TV series starring another former Mr. Universe, German actor Ralf Moeller. Like "Hercules: The Legendary Journeys," the "Conan!" series is campy family fare. Conan also remains popular through an ongoing series of new novels from Tor Books, including several by best-selling fantasy writer Robert Jordan.[19]

The idea for a Conan comic book actually came from fans of the Lancer paperbacks. Based on extensive fan mail in 1970, Marvel writer (and future Editor-in-Chief) Roy Thomas was able to sell his bosses on the then risky idea of sword-and-sorcery comics.[20] The original series, entitled *Conan the Barbarian*, ran for twenty-three years and more than 250 issues. For many of those years, *Conan the Barbarian* was one of Marvel's best-selling titles. Writer Roy Thomas adapted many of Howard's original stories, taking care to make the "slash-first, ask questions later" barbarian acceptable to the Comics Code Authority. When the series premiered, it featured the ornate, elegant art of newcomer Barry Windsor-Smith, who immediately became an industry superstar. Artistic chores were later assumed by talented veterans Gil Kane and John Buscema.

The comic's long-running popularity spun-off a variety of related titles. Attempting to reach an adult market, Marvel launched a black and white magazine format for Conan called *Savage Tales* (1971-1975), but the concept was slow to catch on. The publisher saw greater success with *The Savage Sword of Conan* (1975-1995), also published in black and white magazine format, which ran for 235 issues. Because of its magazine format, *Savage Sword* avoided the Comics Code Authority and was thus a tad more violent than the comic books. Another comic, *King Conan*, chronicling Conan's later years, was published from 1980 to 1989. A magazine-sized reprint title called *The Conan Saga* (1987-1995) ran for ninety-seven issues.

Following the cancellation of the original *Conan the Barbarian* series, Marvel launched a new monthly title in 1994, called *Conan the Adventurer.* This version, intended to capitalize on the animated series, focused on Conan as a young adult. It ran for fourteen issues, then was immediately redesigned in 1995 under the title *Conan* for another eleven issues, ending in mid-1996. Neither title caught the imagination of comics fans, but Marvel was understandably reluctant to allow such a potentially profitable licensing franchise to languish.

In late 1997, Marvel launched a three-issue limited series called *Conan the Usurper.* With a classic Robert E. Howard story adapted by fan-favorite Chuck Dixon, Marvel returned to the original formula that made Conan so popular in the 1970s. The first series was immediately followed by a second, entitled *Conan: Lord of the Spiders*, written by Roy Thomas, author of many of Marvel's early Conan stories. At this point, it appears that Marvel is following a model successfully pioneered by rival Dark Horse Comics—instead of issuing an ongoing monthly series, Marvel will publish Conan as a continuing cycle of three-issue limited series. Although it's still a bit early to pass judgment, so far the stories capture the spirit of Howard's timeless creation, including strong elements of the supernatural. Art work by Stefano Raffaele, Claudio Castellini, and others is well-suited to the harsh brutality of the Hyborian Age.

MARVEL ADVENTURES (1997-)

Unlike rival DC Comics, Marvel does not publish an extensive line of comics for younger children. For four years, Marvel did publish *X-Men Adventures* (later changed to *The Adventures of the X-Men*), based on the highly successful Saturday-morning animated series. The title was canceled in 1997 and replaced with *Marvel Adventures*, which features broader exposure to characters from all of Marvel's recent animated series. Each issue of *Marvel Adventures* stars a different hero or super-hero group, with coverage rotating among the Hulk, Spider-Man, the X-Men, the Fantastic Four, and most recently, the Silver Surfer. Most stories are not adapted directly from the animated TV programs, but they tend to conform to events and characterizations established in those programs. The reading level is not

particularly geared toward younger readers, but the story lines are simpler and easier to follow. Clearly, the publisher's intent is to provide newcomers a suitable introduction to the Marvel Universe, in the hope that its young audience will grow into other Marvel titles. Stories are written by Spider-Man group editor Ralph Macchio. Several artists have worked on the title to date, all of whom utilize a cartoony style compatible with the various animated series.

NOTES

1. Les Daniels, *Marvel: Five Decades of the World's Greatest Comics* (NY: Abrams, 1991), pp. 17-23, 26-36, 40-61.

2. Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 1996), pp. 44-46. According to legendary artist John Byrne, the so-called "Marvel Method" has been employed sporadically since the dawn of the comic book industry, but Stan Lee made it the standard procedure at Marvel, where it was perfected by Lee, together with Jack Kirby and other talented artists. For one of the best descriptions of how the competing methods of comic book scripting/page production actually work, see John Byrne, "How I Do It: Anecdotal Ramblings on the Production of a Comic Book Page," in *Comic Book Artists*, ed. by Alex G. Malloy (Radnor, PA: Attic Books, 1993), pp. 19-27.

3. Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes*, rev. ed. (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, revised edition, 1995), pp. 48-54, 68-74.

4. Stan Lee and John Buscema, *How To Draw Comics the Marvel Way* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), pp. 42-49.

5. Dozens of stories in comic book journals, business magazines, and newspapers of the past few years have documented Marvel's ongoing problems. Headlines such as "The Amazing Marvel Meltdown" (*The Financial Post*, January 13, 1996) have been typical. One of the best overviews can be found in a seven-part special feature entitled "Perelman's Tangled Web: Financier's Hubris Plunges Marvel into Bankruptcy, Ruining a Cultural Icon," by Phyllis Furman, in *Crain's New York Business*, April 28, 1997: pp. 1, 40-44.

6. A press release from DC, dated January 14, 1998, trumpets the fact that, for 1997, DC out-sold Marvel in comics specialty shops for the first time in decades. DC now enjoys a slight edge in market share, in both dollar value and unit volume. For 1997 year-end, DC maintained a 21.6 percent share of the market (based on dollar value), compared to Marvel's 19.4 percent. These figures include sale of comics related-merchandise as well as comic books. Compare this to Marvel's 46.1 percent market share in 1990, as quoted in Michael Lev's "All About Comic Books," *New York Times*, February 17, 1991: p. F5.

7. Oscar Suris, "Oh! A Tangled Web: Spider-Man's Fans Rush to His Rescue," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 1996: p. A1.

8. For an overview of the Heroes World deal, see Furman, p. 44. For the comic book retailer's perspective, see Joseph Szadkowski, "Marvel Power Grab Was No Laughing Matter To Industry," *The Washington Times*, March 18, 1995: p. B4. For a wonderfully irreverent view, try Tom Spurgeon's "Witness at the Marvelution," in *The Comics Journal* (May, 1995).

9. An overview of the X-Men phenomenon can be found in Peter Sanderson's *The Marvel Universe* (New York: Abrams, 1991), pp. 209-249.

10. For background on the creation of the Spider-Man character, see Jones and Jacobs, pp. 59-62. For detail on Spider-Man's history, see Sanderson, pp. 69-95. An excellent, succinct profile of Spider-Man appears in Ron Goulart's *Encyclopedia of American Comics* (New York: Facts on File, 1990), pp. 342-343.

11. Maurice Horn, *The World Encyclopedia of Comics* (New York: Chelsea House, 1976), p. 242

12. Mike Benton, *Superhero Comics of the Golden Age* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1992), pp. 82-86

13. Horn, p. 155.

14. Goulart, p. 67.

15. The best overview of the Silver Surfer's long, complex origin can be found in Mark Gruenwald's *Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe: Deluxe Edition*, no. 12 (November, 1986): pp. 7-10.

16. The Surfer's messianic image is both blatant and recurring. For typical versions of this common interpretation, see Sanderson, pp. 165-67; Daniels, pp. 127-28; Horn, pp. 620-621; and Goulart, pp. 335-336. A more scholarly study can be found in Jean-Paul Babilliet's "Cultural and Mythical Aspects of a Super-Hero: The Silver Surfer, 1966-1970." *Journal of Popular Culture* 28 (Fall 1994): 203-213. Among the many examples Babilliet quotes is a soliloquy in which the hero pronounces, "Forgive me for what I am about to do! And grant me the strength so that I may forgive them..." p. 209.

17. Not many American comic book characters hail from Canada, so Canadian fans feel understandably protective of those who do, especially concerning the successful ones like Wolverine and the members of Alpha Flight. For a detailed history of Canadian super-heroes, consult John Bell's *Guardians of the North: the National Superhero in Canadian Comic-Book Art* (Ottawa: National Archives of Canada, 1992). This fascinating tour includes profiles of such charac-

ters as Nelvana, Johnny Canuck, Canada Jack, The Northern Light, and Captain Canada.

18. "Howard, Robert Ervin, 1906-1936," in *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 157 (Detroit: Gale Research), pp. 251-254. For commentary on the literary merits of Howard's work, see *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, vol. 8 (Detroit: Gale Research), pp. 127-139.

19. A comprehensive bibliography of all Conan stories and novels, including those by authors other than Howard, has been compiled by Bruce L Precourt, can be found at http://home.thezone.net/~jgillard/Biblio.htm

20. Daniels, pp. 148-149.